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## One '69 Gift Worth Cheering Is 'Message From Moscow'

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Soc. 4.01.2 Message  
From Moscow

UNDER the national Christmas tree, there is precious little to rejoice about this year. But at least 1969 has brought us one gift to raise a cheer over, in the unexpected form of an anonymous book called "Message from Moscow."

As will be shown, this little noticed book has far-reaching political meaning. Yet its aim is not political.

Its unique virtue, and its aim, is to tell you what life is really like in the Soviet Union. The wisest, most experienced American experts agree that in this respect, there has been nothing quite like "Message from Moscow" in the whole post-war period.

The author, who signs himself "Observer," writes anonymously because he has no alternative—except to betray the huge cast of Russian friends and acquaintances he brings vividly to life. He is obviously an intelligent man, gifted with great human sympathy; and he writes admirably, as well. Everyone who wants to understand the world we live in should buy and read his book.

IF YOU DO SO, you will find that its underlying virtues are a strong admiration and strong affection for the Russian people. The people's joys and sorrows, their capacity to endure the most grinding hardship, their unquenchable gaiety, their quiet courage, their largeness of heart and knack for simple pleasures—all these are celebrated in a manner no reader can forget.

This is done, moreover, with the most elegant economy and the most enviable eye for the telling detail. In recent English prose, for

instance, there are few passages with richer, truer atmospheric content than "Observer's" description of escaping with his friends for skiing weekends in the countryside around Moscow.

Yet the whole atmosphere is successfully conveyed in one brief paragraph, along with all this very special atmosphere's very considerable significance. In short, this is a first rate book; and it would still be worth reading if the Soviet Union were not the other giant power, which we desperately need to understand.

In this second way, too, the book is first rate. But it must be said that in its political aspect, it is deeply depressing. It overflows with warmth for people of the Soviet Union. It was written, as well, by a man who started out as what may be called an anti-anti-Communist. Yet both what it reports and what it implies make your hair stand up on your head.

To begin with, "Observer" dismisses, as the emptiest of myths, the whole concept of the eventual "liberalization" of Soviet society, which is now a standard cliché of American liberalism. The Russian liberals—the Soviet intelligentsia disenchanted with the dictatorship—were the group in which "Observer" found all his closest friends. As people, he obviously liked them immensely.

But as a political force, he dismisses them as zero-minus; and he reports, convincingly, that this is the way they see themselves. They do not think, and he does not think, that they can ever prevail against "the System." For them, he forecasts that life will grow worse,

not better. And he paints a hideous picture of the omnipresent and still growing power of the secret police.

ONE REASON he believes the liberal one per cent has no real future is that the Russian masses regard this alienated but still privileged group as "effete snobs"—to borrow a recent phrase. To the masses, he also attributes the most admirable qualities, but he leaves no room for doubt about their extreme chauvinism.

In these ways, he condemns as self-delusion the hopes that Westerners have gone on cherishing about the Soviet Union, even after the invasion of Czechoslovakia. But he does something else as well. Indeed the primary political lesson of "Message from Moscow" is that Russians find easily tolerable what Americans could not imaginably tolerate.

This should not be surprising, since Josef Stalin literally exterminated nearly one-eighth of the whole Soviet population, without raising a whisper of resistance, in the peacetime decade ending in 1939. Yet it is grim to think about, to begin with because all American estimates of a safe nuclear balance are squarely based on the assumption that the Russians will never tolerate what we would find intolerable.

An iron system, a chauvinistic people, a toleration for the most fearful human suffering that must affect every Soviet calculation of risk—these are what "Observer" shows us. So in one way, his book is warmly, even lovingly humane; and in this other way, it is very stern and chilling.

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